Remapping the National Landscape

Throughout his career, O’Brien has alternated between narratives primarily set in Vietnam and narratives primarily set in the United States, with *If I Die*, *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried* being followed respectively by *Northern Lights*, *The Nuclear Age* and *In the Lake of the Woods*. This alternation has only ceased with O’Brien’s two most recent novels, *Tomcat in Love* and *July, July*, which are both very dark, often grotesque comedies, like *The Nuclear Age* before them. Unlike *The Nuclear Age*, and unlike O’Brien’s other American novels, though, these two later texts do not immediately engage with the symbolic resonance of the American wilderness, but rather concentrate on the psychological journey of their protagonists, whose lives unfold for the most part against a metropolitan or suburban background. Regardless of their actual environment, however, O’Brien’s characters share one fundamental trait: from the autobiographical narrator of *If I Die* to the variegated, dysfunctional cast of the ‘Class of ’69’ in *July, July*, they all experience the loss of their physical and/or moral coordinates. It is true that, whether set primarily on home ground or ‘in country’, O’Brien’s narratives all return imaginatively to Vietnam: even in *The Nuclear Age*, the only novel not to include amongst its protagonists a veteran from the war, the main character’s life is significantly shaped by his decision not to answer the draft call. And yet, as already adumbrated at the beginning of this study, in a way Vietnam can be read as a landscape of the mind, a metaphor for the mysterious, and often treacherous, psychological terrain that we must navigate in our progress through life, constantly facing, as we all do, intellectual, emotional and moral quandaries, whether consciously or otherwise.

In the pursuit of his role as a postmodern mythographer, O’Brien has also made clever use of the symbolic potential of the American settings in his novels; they provide an interesting counterpart to – and, some may argue, a much needed equivalent of – an analogous figurative take on the alien Vietnamese territory. O’Brien is certainly not the first American writer to exploit the mythical connotations of the geography of his land. As a matter of fact, the trope of a dangerous natural location as the place of sinister encounters, as the repository of one’s innermost – and often wicked – drives is deeply
ingrained in American culture, most notably through the ‘Puritan image of the wilderness as the land of the terrible unconscious in which the dark dreams of men impress themselves on reality with tragic consequences’. O’Brien appears to have taken up this imaginative legacy in his recurrent descriptions and allusions to the impenetrable forests of northern Minnesota or to the hostile expanses of the Wild West, with its savage inhabitants. In particular, his overt references to the American conquest of the original Indian country are part of a deliberate revision of the myth of the frontier, a narrative that is evoked on several occasions in his work, from a critical perspective. O’Brien in fact deflates, or otherwise complicates, any symbolic reading of the American landscape; his use of established tropes exposes the dark underbelly of these conventional images and leads to their mockery and critique. The following pages will therefore provide an analysis of the literal and mythical geography of O’Brien’s oeuvre, concentrating on those novels which capitalize on the austere connotations of the northern frontier, itself set against the national epic of the conquest of the West. Neither landscape, as we shall see, repays the contemporary ‘pioneer’ with a sense of security and belonging. Undoubtedly Vietnam is the geographical location of the most visible traumas in O’Brien’s narrative universe: still, like all good war literature (and I am using the term in its widest possible sense here), O’Brien’s writing deals with deeper, radical questions, with insecurities and ordeals that are part of ordinary human experience. With their ever increasing focus on American society and culture, O’Brien’s stories imply, in no uncertain terms, that it is just as easy to get lost in the apparent safety of familiar surroundings as in the unknown territory of Vietnam.

The American wilderness

The American Mid-West provides the general background to O’Brien’s fiction: even when it is not the immediate setting of the narrative, this region figures as the place of origin and the general cultural reference for the great majority of O’Brien’s protagonists. The narrator of If I Die describes himself as a Baby-Boomer from ‘the prairies of southern Minnesota’ (IID, 21); O’Brien was born in Austin, Minnesota and brought up in Worthington, on Lake Okabena, a small town boasting the self-appointed title of ‘Turkey Capital of the World’ (IID, 23). This same location reappears, appropriately, as home to (the fictional) Tim O’Brien in The Things They Carried, while its buoyant pride and provincial mentality are recreated in Owago, the ‘Rock

Cornish Hen Capital of the World’ (*TL*, 53), birthplace of Professor Thomas H. Chippering, as well as setting for the original trauma that triggers his entire, convoluted narration in *Tomcat in Love*. With the partial exception of *July, July*, whose Darton Hall College appears to be located in the metropolitan space of the Twin Cities, all the other narratives written by O’Brien are primarily set against smaller communities, caught between naive or, at worst, parochial instincts on one hand, and a strong ethical drive and a belief – or a desire to believe – in fundamental human decency on the other. This is the picture typically associated with small-town America, particularly in the Mid-West, a part of the country often defined for what it is not, rather than for what it is, according to facile stereotypes: neither cosmopolitan and vibrant like the East Coast, the financial, political and intellectual hub of the nation, nor genteel and decadent like the South, nor even free-spirited and wild like the West.

Alongside a sizeable slice of suburban American life, O’Brien’s Mid-West also provides – in two memorable representations of its native wilderness – an altogether harsher physical and moral panorama of isolation and asperity, hard work and integrity. *Northern Lights* and *In the Lake of the Woods*, the two novels that immediately allude to their geographical location in their titles, are both set in northern Minnesota, whose inhabitants suitably reflect, in their disposition, the impervious and secluded nature of the landscape. The locals are portrayed as subscribing to a culture of endurance and reserve, and as coupling their strong sense of morality with a mistrust of authority and a keen spirit of independence. This is a different kind of pioneer country from the canonical frontier, whose westward development is identified with ideas of movement, expansion and progress, and whose individualism is associated with lawlessness on one hand, and a positive entrepreneurial flair on the other. O’Brien’s description of the Swedish settlement in the Arrowhead region represents instead a dour, unglamorous reality:

> Perry learned about the hardships. Hardship was something the old man stressed. He learned that the Swedes broke ploughs on base rock, got robbed on prices, seeded soil meant for spruce and not corn, wore silent hard faces. He learned that they left Sweden in famine and, in perfect irony, came to Minnesota just in time for more of the same: locusts and drought, fierce winter and boulders; they left bad soil for worse soil, rock for rock, pine for pine. In some miserable genetic cycle, they did not leave at all and they did not arrive. (*NL*, 76)

This is the earliest sustained description of the northern environment in O’Brien’s entire oeuvre: introduced by a comprehensive chronological history of the land – from the Ice Age, through the arrival of a sequence of Indian tribes and, later, of successive waves of European immigrants – the
passage works by repetitions and accretions, the faint echo of biblical cadences highlighted by the image of the ‘locusts and drought’. In spite of its detailed genealogy, this unruly terrain – not barren, but impossible to domesticate – is connected with a certain timelessness: the wilderness remains intact and, even more alien to the concept of the frontier, the immigrants’ journey is characterized by stasis, disappointment and resignation. Thus, Perry’s lesson gives the lie to the narrative of progress of the American Dream and of the conquest of a territory ready to be tamed, while supporting instead the idea that ‘[a]t the time of its founding, Minnesota was a fanciful invention used to draw immigrants to the state with the enticement of all the land they wanted in a “bracing and invigorating climate”’.  

At no point in either novel, nor indeed in any of his books, does O’Brien endorse a mythical vision of this setting as the backdrop for a national epic of heroism and for smaller narratives of individual spiritual growth and self-realization. If O’Brien’s treatment of the northern landscape were to be related to a strand of American culture, it would not be connected to the pioneer’s faith in the unstoppable march of progress, but perhaps to the Puritan suspicion of the wilderness as the locus of dangerous encounters with one’s inner demons. The forests and lakes of Minnesota are coloured by the characters’ moods: rather than a way into positive epiphanies, they reflect the onlookers’ doubts and anxieties, and add to the atmosphere of narrative inconclusiveness. As we have seen in the previous chapter, in Northern Lights the ability to commune with nature – be it the masculine challenge of the cross-country skiing expedition or the feminine enjoyment of the luxuriant undergrowth – appears to be set up as an opportunity for redemption; an opportunity, however, that ultimately proves to be illusory. Short of being a route to self-assertion, the Hemingwaysque encounter with the wilderness is deflated into a pathetic misadventure, while the appreciation of the less imposing elements of the landscape (the pond and the brushwood, both teeming with life) fails to lead to any meaningful realizations.

O’Brien sketches a diminutive, comic version of Paul Perry’s near-fatal trial in the forest with the account of a disastrous father–son activity at Indian Guides in Going After Cacciato. Early on in the narrative, in the middle of a chapter recording new recruit Paul Berlin’s first impressions of the American military organization in Vietnam, there is a brief, yet conspicuous, passage describing how as a child, ‘with his father, he had gone to Wisconsin to camp and be pals forever. Big Bear and Little Bear’ (GAC, 47). Paul, whose very name recalls the protagonist of Northern Lights, has his own small-scale initiation rite in the wilderness: this time the cultural significance of the

experience is highlighted by its inscription within the practice of the Indian Guides, an organization clearly reminiscent of Baden-Powell’s Boy Scouts, as well as drawing on the mythology of the frontier. The congregation of these father-and-son pairings around the campfire is a wishful-thinking enactment and celebration of the ideal American social system, based on democratic arrangements and a shared sense of belonging, as well as on the belief in the individual’s ability to survive and prosper under the spiritually rejuvenating influence of nature. Unfortunately, even a controlled, child-friendly replica of the Native American experience of the wild – ‘Yellow and green headbands, orange feathers. Powwows at the campfires’ (GAC, 47) – proves to be too much for Little Bear: on the third day, he gets lost during a scouting exercise, unable to follow his father’s tracks, and is finally found ‘bawling in the big Wisconsin woods’ (GAC, 47). Paul’s misadventure leaves him with a feeling of sickness that will only go away when, having decamped early, father and son make their way back home, and the conversation moves to baseball and other ‘white man talk’ (GAC, 47).

The bathetic ring of this episode, compared to Paul Perry’s (already unheroic) encounter with the wilderness, is emphasized by the contrast between the two fathers: unlike Pehr Perry, ‘Big Bear’ is a benign figure, an accommodating and affectionate parent. Paul Berlin does not harbour any resentment, nor has he suffered from any long-term emotional damage as a result of his early failure to live up to ancestral standards and commune with his well-meaning father. In fact, Berlin appears to have internalized the paternal lesson after all, in plain denial of his previous inability to put it successfully into practice. The debacle at Indian Guides thus works as an ironic gloss to a previous passage in the narrative when, at the end of the first chapter of the novel, in a moment of relative peacefulness, ‘as if a mask had been peeled off, the rain ended and the sky cleared and Paul Berlin woke to see stars’ (GAC, 31). This seems to be no mundane awakening, but rather the possible harbinger of a revelation: nature itself lets up and Berlin is immediately drawn to look at the sky, in what reads like a typical soldierly idyll. The stars provide a reassuring image and the comfort of well-known names and patterns and, most importantly, the promise of reliable coordinates:

They were in their familiar places. It wasn’t so cold. He lay on his back and counted the stars and named those that he knew, named the constellations and the valleys of the moon. He’d learned the names from his father. Guideposts, his father had once said along the Des Moines River, or maybe in Wisconsin. Anyway – guideposts, he’d said, so that no matter where in the world you are, anywhere, you know the spot, you can trace it, place it by latitude and longitude. (GAC, 31, my italics)
The recollection of Wisconsin is quickly dismissed, and with it Berlin chooses to ignore the previous inefficacy of his own sense of direction and of his father’s role as a guide.

In the comparative reading of these two episodes from *Cacciato*, the legacy of the paternal interpretative grid is devalued and, by extension, the validity of a whole set of cultural coordinates is placed under scrutiny: does America really know where she is and where she is heading to? The answer must be no, as it is further testified by Berlin’s irredeemable confusion upon his arrival in Vietnam: ‘He was lost. He had never heard of I Corps, or the Americal, or Chu Lai. He did not know what a Combat Center was’ (*GAC*, 43). The description of Berlin’s hopeless disorientation – past and present, for the Indian Guides episode follows it shortly – is ironically contained in a chapter entitled ‘How They Were Organized’, which also records how, on the third night after his arrival in country, Berlin writes to his father and asks him to ‘look up Chu Lai in a world atlas’ (*GAC*, 45). Thus, the campsite vignette works as a *mise en abyme* of Berlin’s experience of the war, faced by the young soldier with the same misguided reliance on a paternal guidance that is once again doomed to be pitifully inadequate to offer a secure sense of direction. Having exposed the fragility of the American sense of purpose, and having questioned the reliability of traditional epistemological systems and certainties, *Going After Cacciato* can then proceed to explore a different way of coming to terms with reality and with its moral quandaries through a sustained praise of our imaginative resources, one of O’Brien’s most typical and powerful themes. The naivety of Berlin’s attempt to get his geographical bearings is later subsumed within his immense creative effort to envisage a way out of the war in his imaginary flight to Paris, a westward journey towards a resonant, yet ambivalent, destination, as already discussed in Chapter 2.

The incomprehensibility of the wilderness, and the denial of any cathartic function in the encounter with it, is at the centre of *In the Lake of the Woods*, which, more than any other narrative by O’Brien, exploits the connotations of the seclusion and impenetrability of its setting. The Northwest Angle is an extreme, and eccentric, manifestation of the awesome landscape of northern Minnesota: from the main body of the country, it ‘juts like a thumb into the smooth Canadian underbelly at the 49th parallel. A geographical orphan, stranded by a mapmaker’s error, the Angle represents the northernmost point in the lower 48 states, a remote spit of woods and water surrounded on three sides by Canada’ (*LW*, 289). A cartographer’s oversight, a parentless oddity, an alien body puncturing the otherwise regular border between Canada and the United States, the Angle projects images of alterity, menace and aloneness. Within it, the Lake of the Woods ‘gazes back on itself like a great liquid eye. Nothing adds or subtracts. Everything is present, everything
is missing' (*LW*, 290). Sometimes people get lost here, and disappear forever. ‘Thickly timbered, almost entirely uninhabited, the Angle tends towards infinity. Growth becomes rot, which becomes growth again, and repetition itself is in the nature of the angle’ (*LW*, 290). The tension towards infinity described in this passage, for all that it may sound like a Transcendentalist borrowing, conveys a different message from the sublime communion with the wilderness famously envisaged by Emerson.³ Here, nature’s gaze is narcissistic, the landscape is complete and self-sufficient, caught up in an endless loop, indifferent – if not hostile – to man. O’Brien’s scenario is absolutely secular: its temporality is not the ‘perpetual youth’, the time of eternity of Emerson’s epiphany, but a vertiginous deferral of meaning, the flickering of presence, an inescapable cycle of repetition without solution; in short, it expresses an undisguised incredulity about the possibility of attaining closure and signification, which is the underlying theme of the whole novel.

The nature of the Angle/(narrative) angle is intimated at the very beginning of the story, and indeed signalled as the reason why John and Kathy Wade seek refuge in the woods: the two protagonists are trying to escape the limelight in the aftermath of the scandal that has destroyed John’s reputation and political career. About twenty-six years after the event, John’s involvement with the My Lai massacre has finally (and not implausibly) come to light during his electoral campaign for the US Senate. The secret that John had guarded even from his wife resurfaces to wreak a double revenge, devastating both his public and private life: defeated by the landslide victory of his political opponent, John must also face the strain that this shocking revelation has placed upon his marriage with Kathy. From this perspective, it is easy to see the lure of Lake of the Woods, its isolation, its ‘secret channels and portages and bays and tangled forests and islands without names. Everywhere, for many thousand square miles, the wilderness was all one thing, like a great curving mirror, infinitely blue and beautiful, always the same. Which

³ Cf. these familiar words from ‘Nature’: ‘In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, – no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, – master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature’; Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Peter Norberg (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004), p. 12.
was what they had come for. They needed the solitude. They needed the repetition, the dense hypnotic drone of woods and water (LW, 1, my italics). The image of nature as a blank slate, or as a series of anonymous hiding places, the refuge sought after as the catalyst for a new start in life, acts in fact as a magnifying mirror, giving back a merciless reflection of the protagonists’ shortcomings, and is as elusive and meandering as their most mysterious motives.

At the heart of the novel, lost in the labyrinth of waterways and vegetation, lies the pivotal incident in the main narrative: Kathy’s disappearance, which is eventually followed by her husband’s one-way journey northward into Lake of the Woods. The novel is interspersed with eight chapters, all entitled ‘Hypothesis’, offering a variety of equally inconclusive speculations about what might really have happened to Kathy: was it an accident, a suicide or murder? Did she suddenly decide to run away from her husband or had they planned the escape, and final reunion, together from the start? The uncertainty surrounding Kathy’s disappearance inevitably translates onto the role played by John in the event: is he an ignorant victim of circumstances, an abandoned husband or an accomplice? Is he guilty of manslaughter, or perhaps even murder? Besides the tentative series of hypotheses, In the Lake of the Woods contains three more distinct groups of chapters: the ones somewhat misleadingly entitled ‘Evidence’ are made up of testimonies from the inquests on Kathy’s disappearance and on the My Lai massacre, as well as references to other fictional and historical texts; hovering between the speculative character of hypothesis and the claim to objectivity of evidence, there is a group of meditative, almost essayistic chapters on ‘The Nature of’ concepts as diverse as loss, marriage and war; finally, the remaining chapters provide the one chronological, ‘factual’ narrative sequence in the novel, charting the Wades’ story from their arrival in Lake of the Woods, through John’s memories of the night when Kathy vanished, to the subsequent investigation and John’s final departure for the wilderness.4

In the Lake of the Woods revisits – expanding its symbolic connotations – another narrative strategy already found, on a small scale, in the previous novel: while in Going After Cacciato the memory of the Wisconsin forest works as a mise en abyme of Berlin’s helplessness and confusion during the war, the intricate depths of the northern setting of In the Lake of the Woods parallel, and envelop, the hidden layers of events preceding the time of the main narrative: the tragedy of My Lai, but also silent domestic dramas, such as John’s troubled relationship with his father, and the latter’s suicide, as well

4 As I show in Chapter 5, this categorization builds upon the tripartite division of Going After Cacciato, whose narrative structure comprises a series of realistic war sketches, Berlin’s introspective meditations while on duty at the observation post and the account of the squad’s fantastic journey to Paris in pursuit of Cacciato.
as Kathy’s secret life of little rebellions against her husband’s suffocating love and her unspoken discontent with her lot as a trophy wife. The wilderness that finally takes Kathy and John in becomes the objective correlative of the wilderness within the two characters, and ultimately within human nature itself: it is not just the secret of John’s counterfeited Army records and compromising presence in My Lai to be replaced by the mystery of his venture into the northern woods. Kathy’s vanishing act – whether voluntary or otherwise – is slowly revealed to be the last in a series of brief disappearances and escapes, possibly her most successful attempt to elude her husband’s possessive surveillance, and undoubtedly the climactic event in her history of reticence and silences. Like a ‘great curving mirror’, the natural world reflects in its impenetrability the web of ellipses, gaps and subterfuges that characterize the Wades’ public profile and, significantly, also their self-awareness and mutual relationship. At the beginning of the novel, for example, John and Kathy appear to be in denial about the repercussions of John’s electoral defeat, desperately trying to imagine, in a futile game of make-believe, a happy future together: ‘At night they would spread their blankets on the porch and lie watching the fog move toward them from across the lake. [...] They pretended things were not so bad. The election had been lost, but they tried to believe it was not the absolute and crushing thing it truly was’ (LW, 1–2). From the start, numbed by the emotional weariness that has been creeping on them like the approaching haze, the couple seem unable to bridge the distance between them.

Readers are later made to realize that this void is rooted deep in John’s secretive and manipulative nature and in Kathy’s own enigmatic past and reservations about her husband’s behaviour. As the narrative progresses, the entire spectrum of human relationships, from the familial and marital to the social and political, is shown to be constantly subject to misreadings and hesitations, deceptions and prejudices, prey to epistemological limitations and ethical shortcomings. Indeed even the characters’ own perceptions of themselves prove to be unreliable: John and Kathy deceive themselves and each other when they fail to admit their unhappiness; John deceives himself when he tries to atone for My Lai by serving a second term in Vietnam; Kathy deceives herself when she sacrifices her unborn baby and plays along with the role of the candidate’s wife in spite of her loathing for the political game. The dimension of history, accompanied by an emphasis on the social aspect of human existence, is much more evident in this text than in any other novel written by O’Brien, given the narrative engagement with what is perhaps the most notorious episode of the Vietnam war and the creation of two protagonists whose lives unfold – and unravel – in the public eye.

The heightened focus on the social sphere finds expression in O’Brien’s portrayal, in broad strokes, of the dichotomy between the metropolitan and
the ‘rural’, i.e. the city and the backwoods, an opposition that is much clearer and starker here than in *Northern Lights*. The two worlds are perfectly epitomized by the careerist, unscrupulous Tony Carbo, Wade’s spin-doctor, and by the earnest, uncompromising local deputy sheriff, Vinnie Pearson. Carbo’s reaction to John’s secret about his presence in My Lai is dictated for the most part by purely pragmatic considerations: he can understand John’s desire to keep quiet about it – ‘who the hell wouldn’t?’ (*LW*, 199) – and is even prepared to believe that John’s political ambitions might have been a genuine attempt to atone for his role within the war. However, his analysis of John’s decision to hide the truth ultimately boils down to matter-of-fact, cynical comments: in a run for the US Senate ‘[t]he shit had to come out: a principle of politics’ (*LW*, 200).5 Similarly, when asked to speculate about the events in Lake of the Woods, Carbo, who inclines towards the hypothesis that the double disappearance might have been planned from the start, draws his conclusions without being at all judgemental: ‘reputation shot, no more career, bills up the gazoo. Christ, I’d run for it too’ (*LW*, 299). In marked contrast, Vinnie Pearson, a former Marine who tellingly remarks that he ‘[d]idn’t kill no babies’ (*LW*, 128), is very outspoken in his contempt for John Wade: in the eyes of this fellow Vietnam veteran, Wade’s connection with My Lai is seen as an irredeemable mark of criminality. Throughout the narrative, Pearson is the most relentless advocate of Wade’s guilt in relation to Kathy’s disappearance: from ‘The guy offed her’ (*LW*, 12) through ‘The fucker did something ugly’ (*LW*, 30) to ‘Something was wrong with the guy. No shit, I could almost smell it’ (*LW*, 148), Pearson’s lapidary and violent accusations continue to convey his adamantly, unproven conviction of Wade’s culpability.

The middle ground between Carbo’s detached and amoral stance and Pearson’s personal and judgemental attitude is represented by Ruth and Claude Rasmussen, the owners of the lakeside cottage rented by the Wades. The couple are typical Minnesotans of Scandinavian stock, with all the connotations characteristic of their background already outlined at the beginning of this section: a no-nonsense, rough (yet generous) sense of hospitality, paired with an instinctive reserve and an impatience with the niceties and hypocrisies of so-called civilized society. An ‘old-time party contributor’, Claude is barely acquainted with the Wades; yet, after the disaster of the primary, his offer of ‘the cottage and clean air and two weeks without newspapers’ had reached John as ‘the only phone call that mattered’, and had been accepted as it should have been, at face value, the gesture of a ‘tough old bird’

5 The choice of expletive is not remarkable *per se*, given that recourse to scatological language is very common in references to unfortunate or difficult circumstances: even so, as we shall see in the next chapter, O’Brien seems to be particularly keen to exploit this connection, to the point that he develops and outlines an entire emotional landscape around the image of the war as a scatological horror.
devoid of ulterior motives (LW, 88). The relationship between the two continues along these lines: a man of few words, Claude teases John by referring to him as ‘Senator’, and by dwelling without any qualms on the scale of his defeat. At the same time, however, Claude cultivates a deliberate ambiguity in the expression of his political faith, and ultimately of his solidarity with John:

‘…Say what you mean, mean what you say. One thing I don’t care for, it’s pussy-foot politics.’

There was silence while the old man refilled his glass.
‘Anyhow,’ he said, ‘can’t say I voted for you.’
Wade shrugged. ‘Not many can.’
‘Nothing personal.’
‘No. It never is.’
Claude gave him a sidelong glance, amused. ‘Other hand, I’m not saying I didn’t. Maybe so, maybe not. What surprised me – the thing I don’t get – you never once asked for help. Money-wise, I mean. You could’ve asked.’
‘And then what?’
‘Hard to say. People claim I’m a sucker for lost causes.’ (LW, 93)

Claude’s evasiveness continues to leave ample room for readers to infer his disapproval of John’s mistakes – a disapproval that, presumably, extends to John’s conduct in Vietnam.

Nonetheless, his censure appears to be tempered by an unwillingness to pass judgement and by the awareness that John is already a ruined man. Rather than genuine sympathy, Claude displays a reluctance to add to John’s misery, as if in obeisance to an old-fashioned ethos of sportsmanship, dictating that you should not kick a man who is already lying on the ground. There is a sense of equanimity and fair play about Claude’s attitude to John, particularly in relation to his role in the mystery of Kathy’s disappearance; the old man joins in the debate about the extent of Wade’s present (and past) guilt to point out the need to keep an open mind, and to argue for the necessity to give Wade, if not the pardon implicit in the offer of a second chance in public life, at least the benefit of the doubt even in the face of past errors: ‘That’s what I keep telling people. Guy yells wolf, he gets stuck with the mistake, can’t say a goddamn thing to change anybody’s mind’ (LW, 249). Claude’s peroration is both a concession to the possibility of atonement and an indictment of the hasty conclusions often reached by a public opinion only too keen on reaching some kind of closure. Having initially refused to let John go on his own in search of his wife, Claude eventually provides him with a boat and a chart book, and encourages him, in a brief note, to set off for Canada and ‘evaporate’:
'Whether you’re nuts or not, I don’t know,’ Claude had scrawled, ‘but I can honestly say that I don’t blame you for nothing. Understand me? Not for nothing. The choices funnel down and you go where the funnel goes. No matter what, you were in for a lynching. People make assumptions and pretty soon the assumptions turn into fact and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it. Anyhow, I’ve got this theory. I figured what happened was real-real simple. Your wife got herself lost. The end. Period. Nothing else. That’s all anybody knows and the rest is bullshit. Am I right?’ (LW, 282)

In the end, just like the taciturn Elroy Berdhal in ‘On the Rainy River’, Claude becomes an accessory to the protagonist’s rendezvous with his conscience: he sends John away to battle with his own demons – possibly to commit suicide by losing himself in Lake of the Woods – rather than acquiesce in a less than perfect, summary justice that, in the absence of a clear conclusion, would still condemn him to social censure and ruin.

In a narrative one quarter made up of hypotheses, and where everybody has a theory, Claude’s ‘speculation’ amounts to little more than a reminder of the facts. Significantly, this is also the position advanced early on by the narrator – an anonymous veteran who started his tour of duty one year after Wade’s arrival in Vietnam – who invites those requiring solutions to ‘look beyond these pages. Or read a different book’, for ‘evidence is not truth. It is only evident’ (LW, 30, n. 21) – or, in other words, only available to consideration and susceptible to different interpretations. As I have already suggested, this epistemological relativism is reflected by the unspoken role played by the natural environment in this story; rather than representing the permanence and reliability of nature, even the cycle of the seasons highlights the precariousness and subjectivity of perception and exposes a nihilistic logic whereby different elements and impressions cancel each other out, instead of creating a fuller and clearer picture: ‘It is by the nature of the angle, sun to earth, that the seasons are made, and that the waters of the lake change color by the seasons, blue going to gray and then to white and then back again to blue. The water receives color. The water returns it. The angle shapes reality. […] The mathematics are always null; water swallows sky, which swallows earth’ (LW, 291).

This passage is reminiscent of a previous, overt intervention on the narrator’s part, an attempt to communicate his sense of what might have triggered the My Lai massacre: ‘It was the sunlight. […] The unknown, the unknowable. The blank faces. The overwhelming otherness. […] Twenty-five years ago, as a terrified young PFC, I too could taste the sunlight. I could smell the sin. I could feel the butchery sizzling like grease just under my eyeballs’ (LW, 203, n. 88). While the characterization of the enemy as an unfathomable, invisible, even malign entity conforms to orientalist construc-
tions of the Other as ultimately provoking and deserving its oppression, the insistence of the entire text on how reality is always shaped by the angle of perception – by a trick of the light, one might say – and the shift to the first person in this passage give the lie to any apportioning of blame to the victims of the massacre and fails to exonerate people like Wade, or the narrator himself, even as they acknowledge the complexity of the plight of the American soldiers. It is clear that one of O’Brien’s aims in writing this novel is to prevent My Lai from slipping away from our collective memory; yet, in its investigation of the burden of responsibility and the legacy of guilt for the atrocities committed in Vietnam, the narrative ultimately focuses on the predicament of the individual and, interestingly, refuses to damn its main character completely.

The exposure of John’s role in the massacre is accompanied by several intimations that his second tour of duty, and indeed his political career, may have been motivated, in part at least, by a desire to redeem himself, crucially in his very own eyes, given his initial success in covering up the exact record of his time in Vietnam (the plausibility of this hypothesis is indeed heightened by the endorsement it receives by Tony Carbo, whose calculating character makes him otherwise always ready to believe the worst of people). Conversely, Wade’s role in his wife’s disappearance is kept deliberately and painstakingly obscure. Steven Kaplan observes that the final draft contains a last-minute change to the text of the advance preview copy of the book, aimed at toning down the implication that John might have been literally responsible for Kathy’s vanishing. John Wade is certainly not a likeable character, and his motives and actions remain less than pure and unselfish, but neither the narrator, nor – one suspects – the author, is willing to cast the first stone. The alternative is not a psychological justification, or a rationalization of the events, but rather a confrontation with ‘the mystery of evil’ that touches us all. Wade’s story is an opportunity for the narrator to face up to his own Vietnamese ghosts: ‘I have my own PFC Weatherby. My own old man with a hoe’ (LW, 301; n. 127). This confession, with its reference to the two men killed by Wade in My Lai, is an unequivocal admission of guilt, presumably voiced as an indirect plea for forgiveness, both for the teller and, by implication, for the main character of this tale.

O’Brien himself suggests that his protagonist’s and his narrator’s negotiation of their guilt works as a vicarious admission and processing of his own...
implication with the war: ‘the My Lai thing, in its grotesque, monstrous, obscene evil, seems a fitting corollary. It seems to fit the sense of evil that I live with day by day and the guilt I feel day by day’. Significantly, for a story whose main plot is triggered by the disastrous public disclosure of Wade’s personal disgrace, and for a novel so engaged with the realm of history and of collective memory, *In the Lake of the Woods* can be read as a quest for catharsis dictated by a very private need, both on the narrator’s and on O’Brien’s part. Even John Wade is left wandering alone, lost, uttering rambling monologues into the airwaves and later to the wilderness, once the radio has been dropped overboard and the twin Johnsons have been fired up to swing the boat further north into the lake (*LW*, 288). While we cannot completely exclude the possibility that this might be the final act in a finely tuned, premeditated performance, the narrative ends with a series of questions that invite us to think otherwise.

Whatever the truth about his crimes, the image of John’s grief as he heads north seems to suggest that it is our own individual conscience and our awareness of the consequences of our actions that is the harshest judge, the one that we all must inescapably face – a point that reiterates O’Brien’s emphasis on personal responsibility and on the rigorous moral standards that the authentic self is unable to ignore. Written after *The Things They Carried*, in which O’Brien explores and ultimately denies the possibility of achieving individual catharsis through storytelling, *In the Lake of the Woods* begins with the protagonist’s undeniable complicity in an infamous war crime, and draws immediate attention to the impact of the revelation of one’s guilt in the communal sphere, where private narratives enter a truly public domain. As the novel progresses, however, the focus shifts again to the intimate dimension of the quest for self-forgiveness, atonement and individual redemption. After all, legal justice can be manipulated or evaded with relative ease, as testified by Wade’s lies and particularly by his final escape, sanctioned by Claude, the character who provides through his initial reserve the moral centre of the book and who explicitly questions the soundness of public assumptions. The fact that the core of the text is a concern with individual moral struggles is confirmed by the presence of a narrator whose declared investment in Wade’s story and whose idiosyncratic compilation of the ‘Evidence’ chapters make his mediation of the story fraught with personal issues.

Previous readings of *In the Lake of the Woods* (cf. Kaplan, Herzog and Heberle) have focused on the experimentalism and the metafictional aspect of the text, which undoubtedly highlights the constructed nature and the partiality of official history and its status as one of the many possible,
competing versions of an event. In fact, I would not hesitate to use Linda Hutcheon’s term ‘historiographic metafiction’ to define this text, which continuously blurs the boundary between factual account and imaginative fabrication, with its fictional rendition of the events in My Lai, alongside accurate quotations from historical sources of varied evidential value, such as the records of Lieutenant Calley’s court-martial or Robert Caro’s political biography of Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon’s political memoir Six Crises (1962). The courageous revisitation of My Lai in In the Lake of the Woods has won this narrative the American Historians’ Cooper Prize for best historical novel; yet, in spite of the text’s reflections on the production of history, and of its concern with the past and its secrets (foregrounded by the complex temporality of the tale, and its frequent prolepses), the main axis of the narrative remains spatial rather than chronological: In the Lake of the Woods reads more like a travelogue, the story of an exploratory mission, than like a chronicle of the rise and fall of a flawed character. The chronology is as labyrinthine as the physical and moral geography of the landscape and of the characters, but of course the main topos of the narrative is the Wades’ journey of reconciliation or their decision – mutual or otherwise – to go their different ways, or even John’s slow descent into murder and madness. The first two alternatives imply a voyage of self-discovery as well as the need to get to know one’s life-partner once again: what used to be familiar territory must be newly mapped out in the aftermath of the revelations triggered by John’s exposure, which include Kathy’s confession of her resentment for the constant prioritization of John’s political career over any other plan. The third option is a story of perdition and annihilation.

Whatever the scenario, the most recurrent motif in the novel is the sense of getting lost or disappearing, the feeling of disorientation and the lack of a secure grip on reality. In fact, the relationship between John and Kathy revolves around the two characters grounding and simultaneously losing themselves in each other. This is particularly true of how John thinks about Kathy, as exemplified by the following passage, which foreshadows the final, already quoted, description of the nature of the angle with its circular sequence of engulfments ending in a null mathematical operation:

He said he was lost without her. He said she was his sun and stars. He compared their love to a pair of snakes he’d seen along a trail near Pinkville, each snake eating the other’s tail, a bizarre circle of appetites that brought their heads closer and closer until one of the men in Alpha Company used a machete to end it. ‘That’s how our love feels,’ John wrote, ‘like we are swallowing each other up, except in a good way […] Just like those weirdo snakes – one plus one equals zero!’ (LW, 61)

The image of John’s voracious desire to gobble up his wife recurs in more graphic detail later on: ‘Such eyes, he’d think. He’d want to suck them from their sockets. He’d want to feel their weight on his tongue, taste the whites, roll them around like lemon drops’ (LW, 72). This fantasy of physical incorporation is combined with John’s equal and opposite wish to become part of Kathy in a sort of regressus ad uterum: ‘There were times when John Wade wanted to open up Kathy’s belly and crawl inside and stay there forever. He wanted to swim through her blood and climb up and down her spine and drink from her ovaries and press his gums against the firm muscle of her heart’ (LW, 71; notice how the mention of ‘gums’ rather than ‘teeth’ contributes to John’s infantilization. This kind of regression is a recurrent trope in O’Brien’s writing).

Although Kathy’s feelings for John do not seem to match the eerie intensity conveyed by these images – possibly because the narrative focuses for the most part on John and gives less space to the articulation of Kathy’s psychology – there is a clear intimation that she may have experienced the desire to lose herself in John (LW, 187). This hypothesis is given a certain authoritativeness by the fact that it is advanced by Pat, Kathy’s cynical sister, who is bemused at the very thought that anybody might wish for such self-abandonment and such dependence on somebody else. Admittedly, the description of the amorous passion with reference to space is not at all unusual: one need only mention its representation as ek-stasis, i.e. the displacement and loss of the self, or the expression ‘to fall in love’, a dead metaphor whose literal aspect is emphasized by John in his final monologue.11

Having said that, in In the Lake of the Woods even themes that we would perhaps expect to unfold along a temporal axis, such as the Wades’ hopes and dreams for the future, are configured in spatial terms: the restoration of happiness, for example, is envisioned by the couple as ‘a physical place on earth, a secret country, perhaps, or an exotic foreign capital with bizarre customs and a difficult new language’ (LW, 3). The arduousness of the Wades’ journey towards this and other destinations is compounded by the meaning of their name, with its connotations of impeded movement and slow progress.

The image of a strenuous and encumbered advancement towards an impossible goal is also used by the narrator to describe his long, stubborn pursuit of the truth about John (and, by extension, about his own heart as well as ‘the human spirit’ in general); ultimately, the gathering of information and

11 John’s linguistic analysis draws attention to the relinquishment of individual agency implied by certain expressions: ‘Do we choose sleep? Hell no and bullshit – we fall. We give ourselves over to possibility, to whim and fancy, to the bed, the pillow, the tiny white tablet. And these choose for us. Gravity has a hand. Bear in mind trapdoors. We fall in love, yes? Tumble, in fact. Is it choice? Enough said’ (LW, 287).
the writing of this very novel, together with the reasons – contingent or universal – behind similar enterprises are all seen as a frustrated, yet irresistible, epistemological quest:

[…] for all the travel and interviews and musty libraries, [John Wade’s] soul remains for me an absolute and impenetrable unknown, a nametag drifting willy-nilly on oceans of hapless facts. […] What drives me on, I realize, is a craving to force entry into another heart, to trick the tumblers of natural law, to perform miracles of knowing. It’s human nature. We are fascinated, all of us, by the implacable otherness of others. And we wish to penetrate by hypothesis, by daydream, by scientific investigation those leaden walls that encase the human spirit, that define it and guard it and hold it forever inaccessible. (LW, 103, n. 36)

This metafictional notation – which extends the spatial metaphor from the level of the story to the experience of the narrator and to the process of storytelling itself – is typical of the paradoxical postmodern coexistence of the awareness of the impossibility to achieve and communicate secure knowledge, and of a narcissistic, undaunted faith in the suggestive power of fiction. While a deeper analysis of O’Brien’s view of storytelling will have to wait until Chapters 4 and 5, it is difficult to ignore the recurrent association in the above-mentioned passage between the acquisition of knowledge and an act of violent invasion (the ‘impenetrable unknown’ to be conquered, ‘a craving to force entry’, a ‘wish to penetrate’) with possible sexual undertones. It is possible to read the obsessive, brutal desire to apprehend information and gain full intellectual mastery over it as a (critical? tongue-in-cheek?) exaggeration of the project of the Enlightenment, whose narrative of human progress has nonetheless often sidelined alternative world-views, and even legitimized the oppression of marginal cultures. O’Brien’s choice of words is uncomfortable – necessitating perhaps the buffering provided by the fictional narrator – but it is illustrative of a particular epistemological problem, rather than of O’Brien’s personal solution to it, as we shall see particularly in the analysis of his representation of the ultimate unknowable and unrepresentable, the dead enemy, in ‘The Man I Killed’ in Chapter 5.

Indian Country

The representation of man’s problematic relationship with the wilderness and nature, and the projection of one’s moods onto the landscape, are common enough literary themes, not only in the American context. The American cultural makeup is unarguably much more informed by geographical – as opposed to historical – discourses than its various European
counterparts; nonetheless, the dichotomy between nature and culture, in its multiple incarnations (the country vs. the city, wilderness vs. civilization, etc.), is a recurrent feature of post-Romantic Western thought, even as it finds a unique American expression in the myth of the conquest of the Wild West. The most distinctly American legacy of the narrative of the frontier in Vietnam war literature is the perception of the foreign land as an enemy – and, more specifically, of Vietnam as ‘Indian Country’ – paired with the lingering presence of feelings of national guilt inherited from the violent subjugation and destruction of native American cultures. The final part of our discussion of the impact of the frontier myth on O’Brien’s writing deals with the noticeable cross-references, in the narratives that we have analysed so far, between the military experience of Vietnam and the genocide of the Native Americans, a tragic part of US history uneasily subsumed within the comedic plot of the national epic of westward expansion and civilized progress.

Unsurprisingly, *In the Lake of the Woods* adopts the conceit of the landscape as a reflecting mirror, or a blank canvas coloured in by one’s expectations, prejudices and state of mind, in relation both to the forests of Minnesota and to the unfamiliar and disquieting reality of Vietnam. Against the drudgery and the horror of the war, Wade’s skills as a magician – the result of a youthful hobby that had earned him his father’s scepticism and mockery – are transfigured into truly extraordinary qualities, transforming Wade from loner and outsider to ‘Sorcerer’, the oracle and lucky charm of Charlie Company, or the ‘company witch doctor’ (*LW*, 38), as he boasts in a letter to an unimpressed Kathy. With his new identity as Sorcerer, the once shy and solitary Wade finds himself ‘in his element’, in a country which, in its turn, has been reinvented as a land of dark incantations and hidden evil. Vietnam was a place with secret trapdoors and tunnels and underground chambers populated by various spooks and goblins, a place where magic was everyone’s hobby and where elaborate props were always on hand – exploding boxes and secret chemicals and numerous devices of levitation – you could fly here, you could make other people fly – a place where the air itself was both reality and illusion, where anything might instantly become anything else. It was a place where decency mixed instantly with savagery, where you could wave your wand and make teeth into toothpaste, civilization into garbage – where you could intone a few syllables over the radio and then sit back to enjoy the spectacle – pure mystery, pure miracle – a place where every object and every thought and every hour seemed to glow with all the unspeakable secrets of human history. The jungles stood dark and unyielding. The corpses gaped. The war itself was a mystery. Nobody knew what it was about, or why they were there, or who started
it, or who was winning, or how it might end. Secrets were everywhere – booby traps in the hedgerows, bouncing betties under the red clay soil. (LW, 72–73)

The language of magic is used here to provide euphemisms for violent acts of war and to articulate the perceived alterity of the enemy: Vietnam, like an illusionist’s stage, or an otherworldly realm, is a place with carefully guarded secrets, a location where the rules of nature and common sense are continuously suspended, where one would do well not to believe one’s eyes, a laboratory of endless, dangerous transformations. And yet the genealogy of Wade’s passion for illusionism as an escape from reality, and the swiftness of his metamorphosis from taunted loser to acclaimed, charmed performer, are strong reminders of the artificiality, partiality and arbitrariness of the entire account.

It is clear that the representation of Vietnam as a cross between a malign fantasy-land and a deranged magician’s workshop is the product of the same narrative that has cast Wade in the role of witch doctor, possessed with genuine magic talents; in other words, Sorcerer and the wondrous quality of Vietnam are closely intertwined cultural constructs: they shape each other and need each other in order to preserve their respective illusions. Treachery and violence are not objectified and projected onto Vietnam, as the country’s evil emanations; rather, they are shown to be already present in Wade/Sorcerer’s nature and already circulating in the soldiers’ frame of mind, in their attempt to verbalize and exorcize – even through patently irrational narratives – the inexplicable and terrifying experience of war. If the Vietnamese setting and the war coalesce, as the irrationality of both is proclaimed, their indiscriminate conflation is exposed precisely for what it is: a crude rhetorical operation, one that banks very adroitly on the derogatory and sinister connotations of a particular kind of magic – the magic that purports to connect the human with the spirit world – in non-Western culture. Herzog points out that in In the Lake of the Woods the references to the illusionist’s craft reveal, at a metafictional level, enlightening similarities with the storyteller’s bag of tricks and relationship with his or her audience, a parallel that O’Brien had developed in more depth in a 1991 essay entitled ‘The Magic Show’, published in Writers on Writing.12

By contrast, at the diegetic level – the level of the characters’, rather than the author’s, opinions – the view of Vietnam as a place of ‘spooks and goblins’ and a land locked into a perverted version of the eternal present of primitive societies (‘a place where every object and every thought and every hour seemed to glow with all the unspeakable secrets of human history’), together with Sorcerer’s self-congratulatory acceptance of the role as ‘company witch

12 Herzog, Tim O’Brien, p. 166.
doctor’, contain disturbing undertones and cultivate the more ominous, and ideologically loaded, aspect of the semantic slipperiness of the word ‘magic’. The above-mentioned passage and Sorcerer’s subtle metamorphosis from prestidigitator to medicine man conflate the idea of illusionism as a spectacular performance and the notion of witchcraft, or shamanism, as the expression of an archaic belief in the possibility of communing with the sacred, a possibility that in Wade’s view of reality – and indeed our own – is regarded contemptuously as tantamount to superstition:

In Vietnam, where superstition governed, there was the fundamental need to believe – believing just to believe – and over time the men came to trust in Sorcerer’s powers. Jokes, at first. Little bits of lingo. ‘Listen up,’ somebody would say, ‘tonight we’re invisible,’ and somebody else would say, ‘That’s affirmative, Sorcerer’s got this magic dust, gonna sprinkle us good, gonna make us into spooks.’ It was a game they played – tongue-in-cheek, but also hopeful. At night, before heading out on ambush, the men would go through the ritual of lining up to touch Sorcerer’s helmet, filing by as if at Communion, the faces dark and young and solemn. They’d ask his advice on matters of fortune; they’d tell each other stories about his incredible good luck, how he never got a scratch, not once, not even that time back in January when the mortar round dropped right next to his foxhole. Amazing, they’d say. Man’s plugged into the spirit world.

John Wade encouraged the mystique. It was useful, he discovered, to cultivate a reserved demeanor, to stay silent for long stretches of time. When pressed, he put on a quick display of his powers, doing a trick or two, using the everyday objects all around him.

Much could be done, for example, with his jackknife and a corpse. Other times he’d do some fortune-telling, offering prophecies of things to come. ‘Wicked vibes,’ he’d say, ‘wicked day ahead,’ and then he’d gaze out across the paddies. He couldn’t go wrong. Wickedness was everywhere.

‘I’m the company witch doctor,’ he wrote Kathy. ‘These guys listen to me. They actually believe in this shit.’ (LW, 37–38)

Wade himself disparages the belief system adopted collectively and only half-jokingly by his company, even as he appropriates and encourages it for his own personal ends. Interestingly, the admission that the soldiers’ trust rests on ‘shit’ is delivered only after Wade has redefined his powers: from magic tricks, to more macabre transformations in the maiming of enemy corpses, to end significantly with bogus prophecies, a ‘gift’ subtly – perhaps even unconsciously – associated with Native American practices and with the belief in the ‘spirit world’. The latter expression is indeed most frequently used in the novel by Richard Thinbill, a Chippewa soldier, who resorts to this image in order to capture the dreadful aftermath of the massacre. Incidentally, Wade’s
racist slip is so much more telling when we consider that Thinbill is his closest friend in the company: the fact that Wade is prepared to speak up in Thinbill’s defence against Lieutenant Calley, in a tense discussion in which the argument about the legitimacy of the American killings is momentarily deflected onto the deliberation of Thinbill’s ethnic origin, highlights the deep-rooted nature of the prejudice behind Wade’s mocking reference to his own role as the company’s witch doctor.

Thinbill is the first soldier to make a public show of taking his distance from the Lieutenant’s inexcusable justification of the incidents in My Lai: his silent censure provokes in his superior an aggressive rebuttal, which relies not only on the deliberate falsification of the actual events, but also on a flippantly abusive dismissal of Thinbill’s cultural heritage with the obvious intent of belittling the man and discrediting his opinions.

Gooks were gooks, he [Calley] said. They [the American soldiers] had been told to waste the place, and wasted it was, and who on God’s scorched green earth could possibly give a shit? […] Thinbill glared at the lieutenant and got up and moved away.

Calley glanced over at Sorcerer. ‘What’s Apache’s problem? Not some weenie roast.’

‘Chippewa,’ Sorcerer said. ‘Thinbill is.’
‘Is he now?’
‘Yes, sir.’
[...] ‘Not up on my tribes, I reckon, but you can still tell him it was a slick operation. Lock an’ load and do our chores.’
‘Yes, sir,’ Sorcerer said.
‘Search and waste.’
‘Except there weren’t any weapons to speak of. No incoming. Women and babies.’

Calley brushed a fly off his sleeve. ‘Now which babies are these?’
‘The ones… You know.’ (LW, 209)

After this exchange, Wade’s tentative allegiance with Thinbill is promptly suppressed by Calley’s official narrative of the massacre, a conspiracy of silence that rests on the denial of the truth of one’s senses: there are no babies, or butchered women, or any other atrocities to be seen, just as there are no flies to be heard ‘buzzing murder’ over the bloated corpses, who certainly do not look as though they belong to innocent civilians.

Against the scandalous perversion of one’s physical perceptions demanded by Calley – and subscribed to, more or less willingly, under the pressure of his command, by the entire company – there are a couple of alternative recollections of the scene. At a first glance, Wade apprehends the location of the
massacre as an oxymoronic ‘living deadness’ \((LW, 214)\), the corpses still appearing to wriggle with what is in fact the movement of millions of flies; ‘An illusion, Sorcerer knew’ \((LW, 214)\). And, as already mentioned, Thinbill does resort on several occasions to the image of the ‘spirit world’ in order to describe the spectral aftermath of My Lai: the stench, the flies, the horror of the ditch full of civilian corpses and, even more unearthly, the strange shapes and silhouettes that animate the twilight in the mountains, still visible to the west even from the company’s new camp by the coast.\(^{13}\) However, while Thinbill obsessively recalls and utters the ghastliness of the scene, both in its material brutality and in its more ethereal, haunting dimension (the ditch and the flies glowing in the dark, the curious shadows against the violet twilight), soon enough Wade turns to playing ‘mind-cleansing tricks’ \((LW, 217)\) in the attempt to forget what he has witnessed and taken part in. Thinbill’s apprehension of the massacre, in spite of the mystical undertone of its articulation, represents a true vision of the appalling barbarity of the war, in direct contrast with Wade’s disingenuous self-delusions.

O’Brien thus reverses the implicit and derogatory connotation of the Native American connection with magic and the unearthly, for it is only in relation to Wade and the other soldiers that magic becomes trickery, illusion and self-delusion and that the ‘spirit world’ is shorthand for superstition. Thinbill’s own references to the ‘spirit world’ – like, to a certain extent, the narrator’s gloss about the ‘mystery of evil’ in footnote 88 – are instead a pressing reminder of the indescribable violence committed against the Vietnamese and of the unmanageable, eerie images that will forever follow its perpetrators and witnesses alike. In support of this hypothesis, Thinbill’s insistent recollection of the buzzing flies can be read as an allusion to Beelzebub, the ‘Lord of the Flies’ or ‘Lord of the Dung’ of the Old Testament.\(^{14}\) More than everybody else, Thinbill is thus aware of the potential for evil ominously lurking in the human heart. A similar reversal of clichés takes place in relation to the identification of the land itself with evil, an idea that extends as a matter of course to the local people, who are seen as ghoulish emanations of their country. This conceit provides the opening for ‘The

13 See, for example, p. 203 and p. 209. Thinbill’s first remark is glossed in a footnote by the narrator, who appropriates the term ‘spirit world’ with reference to the alterity of the Vietnamese enemy, perceived as invisible, alien, unknowable by the American soldiers \((LW, 203, n. 88);\) see above).

14 This suggestion is backed up by ‘The Nature of the Beast’, the title of Chapter 13, which contains the first sustained description of the My Lai massacre. The ‘Beast’ is another name popularly associated with the devil, and Beelzebub in particular, in no small part through the influence of William Golding’s 1954 novel \textit{Lord of the Flies}. For a reading of the intertextual allusion to \textit{Lord of the Flies} in \textit{In the Lake of the Woods}, see David J. Piwinski, ‘My Lai, Flies, Beelzebub in Tim O’Brien’s \textit{In the Lake of the Woods}', \textit{War, Literature and the Arts}, 12.2 (2000), pp. 196–202.
Nature of the Beast’, the chapter on the My Lai massacre: in the brief but effective build-up to the events of 16 March 1968, we read about Lieutenant Calley referring to the Vietnamese as ‘gookish fucking ghosts’, a remark echoed by a soldier, in the dark, doing ‘witch imitations’ (LW, 104). In the eyes of the Americans, Vietnam is clearly a ‘spook country. The geography of evil: tunnels and bamboo thickets and mud huts and graves’ (LW, 105). Once again, Calley is the most vehement advocate of this idea, as he urges his soldiers to ‘Kill Nam’, while firing his weapon against the earth, the grass and a palm tree (LW, 105) – a deranged attack on the land that heralds the indiscriminate carnage soon to explode in the following paragraph.

As in a palimpsest, the description of the violence that engulfs the entire village of My Lai, destroying the huts and the vegetation, killing domestic and wild animals alike, and not even stopping to spare old people and children, contains several, unmistakable references to previous atrocities in the original Indian country. This time, however, it is the ‘cowboys’ who have become savages: Wade himself sees a ‘pretty girl with her pants down’ and her hair gone, and ‘a GI with a woman’s black ponytail flowing from his helmet’ (LW, 108). Significantly, the extent of Thinbill’s participation in the massacre amounts to the killing of some water buffalo, ‘a grotesquely benign revision of analogous episodes in O’Brien’s previous works’15 but also, surely, an allusion to the long-gone livelihood of the American Indians.16 With images like these, it is impossible not to pursue the connection between this war and the genocide of the Native Americans, and not to rethink the simplistic Manichaean distinction between good and evil that underpinned the systematic destruction of entire indigenous cultures – an odious distinction that is echoed in the brutality of Calley’s reprisal, in the name of civilization and rationality, against the perceived subterranean malice of the Vietnamese. The troubling identification of the American intervention in Vietnam as a re-enactment of previous episodes of US history is a major theme in O’Brien’s collation, in the penultimate ‘Evidence’ chapter, of excerpts from various historical records of the American military past. In the aftermath of the 1775 battles of Lexington and Concord, an anonymous

15 Heberle, A Trauma Artist, p. 236.
16 In the analogous episode in Going After Cacciato, as already hinted at in Chapters 1 and 2 above, the killing of the water buffalo is also clearly associated with the mythology of the Wild West: Stink Harris drops on one knee in order to shoot Sarkin’s aunts’ buffalo, thus adopting a recognizable western pose (GAC, 57), and his self-congratulatory comment on his hit – ‘Fastest hands in the West’ (GAC, 58) – reprises a stock cliché of westerns. The fact that the whole novel is pervaded by allusions to the western lore, as pointed out by Slabey, marks the strength of the influence of this foundation myth on Berlin, who is responsible for colouring the account of the imaginative chase after Cacciato with such vivid hues, while in reality the killing of a water buffalo by the American soldiers is reported in a laconic and matter-of-fact way (GAC, 105).
British infantryman recalls how the American troops fighting for independence from their European rulers were an irregular army, invisible and savage enemies, ‘as bad as the Indians for scalping and cutting the dead men’s ears and noses off’ (LW, 262). The analogy between the American predicament in the War of Independence and the Vietnamese resistance against colonial power and neocolonial interference is completed by the accounts of a couple of British officers bearing witness to their soldiers’ shameful retaliation against the civilian population for their losses at Lexington and Concord.

With the War of Independence and Vietnam as apt bookends, the mid-nineteenth-century campaigns against the Native Americans constitute the chronological and emblematic core of O’Brien’s swift, but carefully edited, outline of America’s history of total warfare and gratuitous (even in a military context) violence. O’Brien’s selection of episodes from the Indian Wars focuses on a couple of seminal events and iconic historical figures, such as the infamous Sand Creek massacre of a Cheyenne village in 1864, captured in a particularly gruesome quotation,17 and General William Tecumseh Sherman, whose most significant legacy as a military strategist is indeed the successful implementation of the concept of total warfare, as testified by his ruthless ‘scorched earth’ policy during the American Civil War, and by his positive endorsement of the decimation of the buffalo population as a way of fighting the Plains Indians. In In the Lake of the Woods, Sherman makes a brief appearance as the influential advocate for the retaliatory annihilation of the Native Americans: ‘We must act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to their extermination, men, women, and children’ (LW, 260) runs his telegram to General Grant, prompted by the news of Fetterman’s massacre in December 1866.18 This notorious excerpt finds its way onto the pages of O’Brien’s book via Evan Connell’s account of Custer’s Last Stand, for Custer himself had recorded Sherman’s telegram in his own autobiography, My Life on the Plains (1874). Thus, with a few chosen, wide-sweeping allusions, O’Brien sketches the violent past of his nation, zeroing in on the uncomfortable parallelism with the Vietnamese conflict offered by the American role as foreign – and often reckless and overconfident – invaders of the original Indian country.

17 ‘No prisoners were being taken, and no one was allowed to escape if escape could be prevented. A child of about three years, perfectly naked, was toddling along over the trail where the Indians had fled. A soldier saw it, fired at about seventy-five yards distance, and missed it. Another dismounted and said: “Let me try the little —–; I can hit him.” He missed, too, but a third dismounted, with a similar remark, and at his shot the child fell[…] The Indians lost three hundred, all killed, of whom about half were warriors and the remainder women and children’ (LW, 260–61, n. 97).

18 Fetterman and his seventy-nine men were lured by decoys over Lodge Trail Ridge where they were surrounded by Sioux and killed. After Custer’s Last Stand, this is probably the most disastrous defeat of the American army at the hands of the Plains Indians.
The very mention of Custer, while it recuperates a common topos in the discursive representation of the war, must also be read as a deliberate reference to one of the most cryptic and evocative traumas of American history, an event whose heroic resonance contributed to the founding of the myth of the Wild West, and to its spectacularization of violence and war, as well as to the crystallization of the glorious image of the forces of gallantry and civilizating committing the ultimate sacrifice in their fight against savagery and mayhem. While the emotional legacy of Custer’s problematic heroic model is more conspicuous in *The Nuclear Age*, the controversial figure of this ‘national totem’, ‘a dashing cavalier embedded like a fossil in American folklore’ makes an interesting term of comparison for the protagonist of *In the Lake of the Woods*. Like Custer, John Wade is a calculating self-styled hero and a very ambitious man, indefatigable in promoting his own cult of personality, betrayed in the end by his own sense of invincibility. At the narratorial level, on the other hand, the fascination of Custer’s and Wade’s stories rests on their mystery, ‘which both frustrates and fascinates’ (*LW*, 269, n. 117).

Of course, in spite of the narrator’s obsession with his protagonist as a cipher, even in the fictional world of the novel, ‘Senator’ Wade remains at best a pathetic figure, a man who can only aspire to mythical fame, a risk-taker whose debacle deservedly achieves immediate and inglorious notoriety. Sorcerer is a larger-than-life character only in his own mind, which he has painstakingly purged of its most shameful recollections. Under the intense psychological strain of the events in My Lai, he fails to stand up to the collective madness of Calley’s troops, even as he resists the lure of unchecked violence committed in the name of a spurious desire for revenge. His two killings during the massacre betray an impulsiveness that can only be partly explained by an instinctive drive for self-preservation. While this urge convincingly accounts for Wade’s murder of an old Vietnamese man with a hoe, tragically mistaken for an enemy armed with a rifle, the assassination of

19 In Vietnam the US soldiers’ identification with the doomed Seventh Cavalry at the Little Bighorn was ‘epidemic’, as argued by Bates, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam*, p. 9.
21 Custer remains a controversial myth – ‘[e]ven now, after a hundred years, his name alone will start an argument’ (Connell, *Son of the Morning Star*, p. 106) – for the simple reason that the facts around the battle of Little Bighorn are still uncertain. Connell also points out, quoting Paul Hutton, that with the revision of the conquest of the frontier, Custer’s image has been ‘gradually altered into a symbol of the arrogance and brutality displayed in the white exploitation. […] The only constant factor in this reversed legend is a remarkable disregard for historical fact’ (p. 107). It is interesting to notice how both O’Brien and Connell are caught up in a game of Chinese whispers: O’Brien gives us Custer via Connell’s mediation. Connell in his turn sums up the rise and fall of the General’s image quoting Hutton. This, in itself, is symptomatic of the proliferation of tales that surround this painful chapter in American history.
a fellow American soldier reads more like an execution than as an act of self-defense, and is certainly not quite the automatic reflex that Wade would have himself believe. The details of this episode of ‘friendly fire’ are particularly illuminating: Wade is found at the bottom of an irrigation ditch, caught up in slime and surrounded by Vietnamese corpses, by PFC Weatherby, one of the most violent and callous of the American soldiers, the very man responsible, more than any other, for turning the agricultural landscape into an open-air mass grave. Weatherby, whose name recalls an American gun manufacturer famous for its production of rifles and high-powered magnum cartridges, had been ‘killing whatever he could kill. [...] The almost-dead did twitching things until [he] had occasion to reload and make them fully dead’ (LW, 109). In the face of such an impassioned and crazed lust for blood, Wade’s own brutal reaction as Weatherby looks in on him is a plausible mistake, made by a traumatized soldier, surrounded by dead men and desperate not to take any chances with his own survival. Nonetheless, the moment of Weatherby’s killing is represented twice in the narrative, with a curt, definite emphasis on the contrast between the soldier’s comradely acknowledgement of Wade and the latter’s unflinching gesture: “Hey, Sorcerer,” Weatherby said. The guy started to smile, but Sorcerer shot him anyway’ (LW, 112); and again, “Hey, Sorcerer,” Weatherby said. He started to smile, but Sorcerer shot him’ (LW, 220). According to Piwinski, and for all that his interpretation of the passage is more open-ended than mine, this is the episode that marks Wade’s complicity in the collective iniquity perpetrated by the American soldiers in My Lai: ‘Whether this act was, to quote from Wade’s thoughts at the start of the massacre, “madness” (hysterical reflex?) or “sin” (intentional evil?) is one of the many ambiguities of this novel; nevertheless, Wade clearly has been infected by the murderous evil that he will continue to associate with the flies at My Lai.”

The idea of evil spreading by contamination is certainly suggestive, given the way in which Wade (nomen omen?) is mired in the blood and excrement – the very stuff of Beelzebub – oozing out of the innocent victims piled up in the irrigation ditch. And yet, surely, Wade’s gesture, even if intentional, or particularly if intentional, must be interpreted as an act of retribution on behalf of the corpses crowding the muddy ditch after a pointless massacre, rather than as a conscious display of unfettered malice. Even so, Wade lacks the moral stamina to pursue a lawful and systematic campaign for justice: were he to be assigned a place in Dante’s Inferno, instead of being consigned to the Phlegethon (the boiling river of blood where the violent receive their punishment), he would be fully immersed in the muddy water of the Styx, as befits those guilty of the sin of akedia, who, unable to care, cannot bring

themselves to take action and carry out what they know to be the right thing to do. In this sense, the irrigation ditch is a resonant central feature in the haunting landscape of My Lai: Styx-like, it mirrors the geography of the Fifth Circle of Hell, where the wrathful fight one another, and the slothful, engulfed in mud, are left eternally speechless and gasping for breath. The killing spree, sanctioned by Calley’s mocking misreading of the Old Testament (‘Eyeballs for eyeballs[…]. One of your famous Bible regulations’, LW, 104), is an act of wrongful ire against the Vietnamese civilians. Not actively involved in this particular crime, his two murders notwithstanding, Wade slides – literally and metaphorically – to the bottom of the ditch, where he cannot move and cannot breathe, seized as he is by an unstoppable fit of the giggles. “I guess that’s the right attitude. Laugh it off. Fuck the spirit world” (LW, 220), Thinbill reluctantly concedes in the closing words of ‘The Nature of the Spirit’, which, focusing on the immediate aftermath of My Lai, is the companion piece of the much earlier ‘The Nature of the Beast’. With this laconic pronouncement, Thinbill seals off the failure of his tentative suggestion to Wade that they should team up and report the massacre to the authorities. On his part, only from the ditch, as a ‘dead’ man, can Wade commit a fraught and ambiguous moral act in the execution of Weatherby.

As we shall see in the next chapter, this scenario is typical of O’Brien’s topography of trauma, where underground traps and/or shelters repeatedly provide the background for characters’ confrontation with sudden horrors and painful epiphanies. Of course, In the Lake of the Woods maps out the harrowing geography of the war in another, more literal sense, with its courageous depiction of My Lai as the latest in a series of barbaric incidents involving the American military forces. Left with no doubts about the irredeemable cruelty of characters such as Calley and Weatherby, the reader is nonetheless encouraged to ponder over the nature of evil and the causes of violence: fear, ignorance, blind hatred, desire for revenge, lust for blood, survival instincts, spiritual inertia and moral cowardice all play a part in the slaughter and its aftermath. As Wade’s personal body-count suggests, however, Vietnam and its people have got very little to do with this madness.

Northern Lights, the other novel whose narrative and imaginative centre lies in the protagonist’s gruelling engagement with the American landscape, also contains allusions to a connection between American Indians and the Vietnam war. Admittedly, this association of ideas is much more veiled than its counterpart, presented as ‘Evidence’, in Lake. As in Lake, though, the pervasiveness of this image as a constant, prejudiced reminder of the supposed inferiority of alien cultures is exposed as a naive (when not malicious) self-deception. Milton Bates identifies the subtle details that, paired with the presence of the veteran Harvey, make Northern Lights a Vietnam war novel: Paul thinks of killing rats in the town dump as an
ambush; the unpredictable Addie, nicknamed ‘Geronimo’ by the old mayor, has black eyes interchangeably described as Indian or Asian; the narrative makes frequent references to the history of conflict between native populations and white settlers in the Arrowhead region, a tradition of hostility embraced even by Paul and Harvey in their youthful pranks. The clearest connection between Vietnam and the Indian country – and the most derogatory image of the Vietnamese, alongside their implicit identification with vermin – is provided by the implication that ‘Pliney’s Pond, septic with sewage and Indian feces, is the closest thing to a rice paddy in Sawmill Landing’.²³

The insistence on America’s uneasy past – references to the Arrowhead provide the symbolic framework of the novel – puts into perspective the indiscriminate coalescing and belittling of foreign cultures, but O’Brien’s critique of these attitudes does not stop at their faithful representation against the wider background of the prehistory of the land. In fact, the disturbing connection of the Vietnamese with pests and the image of the pond are both presented in a bathetic light in scenes which ultimately ridicule the American claim to cultural and military superiority, as well as the notion of heroic masculinity. For a start, Paul lacks the nerve to rise to Harvey’s tasteless challenge of killing a rat – not a bad thing, one might argue, given the gratuitous cruelty of the entire affair – when the two brothers, accompanied by Grace and Addie, resort to the popular local pastime of shining headlights into the trash in order to liven up their evening. The motif of the hunt is revisited later on in the narrative, when Paul faces a much more critical challenge, whose gravity, however, is undermined by its dismal, risible outcome. Lost in the woods, with Harvey knocked out by a fever, Paul leaves the shelter to search for food, only to kill what looks like a grotesque reincarnation of the target that he had previously missed: a woodchuck with ‘eyes glittering in a way Perry had never seen before, except for the junkyard rat’ (NL, 279). Paul’s success is seriously undercut by the way in which the entire episode is recounted: he imagines himself setting off on a hunting expedition of epic proportions, when he will finally get to prove his mettle. Armed with his brother’s knife and buoyed by a new-found feeling of bravery, Paul hopes to track down a deer, but ends up bashing a small rodent to death with a ‘thick bough nearly twice his own height’ (NL, 278). Harvey’s open and jovial mockery of Paul’s trophy voices the readers’ feelings towards a very unheroic killing, one of the many factors to make the brothers’ adventurous survival in the woods a dubious test of manliness.

Similarly, Paul’s conquest of his revulsion for the stinking waters of Pliney’s Pond hardly suggests mastery or even reconciliation with what this

place represents, characterized as it is as a sort of primordial broth, teeming both with life and with decay (‘Mosquito eggs, crayfish, larvae, slime and Junebugs, frogs and newt and snakes and toads and lizards, Indian shit and rot…’, NL, 72). In the previous chapter we have already seen how the musty pond provides an apt setting for Paul’s unconvincing rebirth as a man, firm and courageous in his convictions (and in shaking off the long shadow of his father’s education) but also accepting and responsive to a feminine – and therefore ultimately more balanced – outlook on the world. If Paul’s rebirth as a well-adjusted man is illusory, his surfacing from the pond as a martial figure is even more ludicrous: to the twenty-first-century reader, the image looks like an ante litteram comic reversal of the iconography of the hyper-masculine Vietnam veteran epitomized by John Rambo, emerging from the mud as an ironic male Venus, or rather a fully-formed Mars, muscles glinting in the tropical rain, deadly look in his eyes, ready for the kill. By the same token, the disturbing dual function of Pliny’s Pond as a locus of procreation and elimination – its waters part amniotic fluid, part Indian sewage – must be read as a projection of Paul’s fears, and a realistic representation of the psychology of this character, rather than as a reflection of misogynist and racist tendencies on O’Brien’s part. The problematic allusions to the Vietnamese and to the Native Americans that find their way into the novel – primarily through Paul’s perspective – are ultimately derided, just as the limitations of Paul’s early foibles and of his later pretensions to renewal are clearly exposed, in spite of the fact that the narrative remains sympathetic to the plight of its protagonist. In the end, Paul’s predicament is not at all uncommon. It is the staple of modern, and modernist, literature: a human being looking for his or her place in the large scheme of things and, in doing so, coming to terms with his or her own – and other people’s – frailty.

A review of the references to the history of the American Indians in O’Brien’s work would not be complete without a mention of the crucial resonance of the massacre of the Little Bighorn in the plot of The Nuclear Age, whose initial setting in Fort Derry, Montana, makes sure that the image of this tragedy underpins the entire narrative. The story of the battle is etched in the memory of the novel’s protagonist, William Cowling, from a very early age, given his father’s role as the doomed General in the commemoration of Custer’s Last Stand that takes place in the town each year. Enjoying the typical fare of summer pageants – ice-cream, candyfloss, root beer and other fun-fair treats – the citizens of Fort Derry unite in their annual remembrance of their local celebrity, while William’s father gets to die a hero’s death, basking in the limelight until the very last scene (his is the final exit), his dignity, as Custer’s, unharmed in spite of defeat. Cowling-as-Custer is not simply a figure from the nation’s past facing ‘the inescapable scripting of history’ (NA, 11); the yearly re-enactment of the slaughter is
reminiscent of a cathartic ritual, with the sacrifice of an innocent victim—often, as in the fertility rites studied by James George Frazer, the very god of vegetation or the sacred king—performed periodically in order to guarantee the community’s renewal.

The representation of the Last Stand aims for symbolic resonance, rather than historical accuracy, as witnessed by the poetic licence taken in relation to well-documented details about Custer’s demise. The General is shown riding a white stallion and brandishing a silver sword, conjuring up the image of the knight in shining armour, with a princely deportment and pure intentions; the sacrificial nature of Custer’s death is emphasized when the indisputable hero of the performance is turned into a martyr and subjected to the most demeaning affront, as Crazy Horse (another convenient dramatic embellishment, since the great Indian warrior’s whereabouts and his exact role in the battle remain unknown) ‘gallop[s] away with [Cowling’s] yellow wig’ (NA, 11). In actual fact, Custer’s horse, Vic, was a Kentucky sorrel, i.e. chestnut in colour, and—according to what is most likely to be only a legendary account of the story and yet remains the most popular version of the events—the General was not scalped, nor mutilated in any way, a sure sign of respect for the great white chief on his enemies’ part. The creative liberties in the dramatization of the Last Stand are small but significant, for they elevate a controversially heroic historical figure to a mythical status with near-sacred implications: the spotless champion, whose death assumes particularly violent and humiliating connotations, becomes effectively a scapegoat. He dies so that the community may live, a momentous image in a novel whose protagonist-narrator is consumed by a fear of nuclear annihilation and obsessed by a desire for survival. In line with the symbolic magnitude of the event, William faces his father’s ordeal with a mixture of terror and fascination: ‘I worshipped that man. I wanted to warn him, rescue him, but I also wanted slaughter’ (NA, 10–11).

Interestingly, William’s feelings for his father, undoubtedly one of the most positive paternal figures in O’Brien’s canon, are described at this stage as a case of hero-worship, with the provincial real estate agent transfigured into an idol worthy of adoration. This throws into relief Mr Cowling’s status as ‘a decent man’, ‘an ideal father’, ‘a regular guy’ (NA, 28–29). He is a good parent, but all too human and ordinary, completely at a loss in connecting with his son’s apocalyptic nightmares in a way that would immediately make sense to William, i.e. at an imaginative level, by maintaining, for example, William’s illusion of safety in his make-shift shelter under the ping-pong table. Mr Cowling’s failure of sympathy and imagination results in a reversal of roles in his relationship with William, as the son sees through his father’s well-meaning ruses to divert him from his obsessive fears. The promise of a chemistry set and the challenge of a late-night game of ping-pong cause a
mixture of embarrassment and anger in William, who eventually chooses to spare his father’s feelings and humour his transparent, ineffective attempts to drive the nuclear terror away. This entire set-up is the exact opposite of the paternal dynamics outlined in *Northern Lights*: Cowling, unlike Pehr Perry, is not a hated, overbearing patriarch, a self-righteous authority who, having set the law, is always ready to pass judgement. On the contrary, if Pehr Perry is the gloomy prophet of the apocalypse, Cowling is the apocalypse denier. In this respect, he truly has one thing in common with General Custer – and this is where the meaning of the novel’s reference to the Little Bighorn becomes most immediately evident.

As Steven Kaplan points out, the tragedy that triggered the final escalation of the hostilities between the US and the Native Americans is representative of a worrying pattern in American history: the country’s reluctance to bow out in a timely fashion in the face of potential disaster, the negative legacy perhaps of the all-American virtue of self-reliance and of the belief in the nation’s Manifest Destiny and invincibility.24 Like the father coming ‘from leaden ships of sea’ in *If I Die*, or Big Bear imparting his wisdom to Little Bear at Indian Guides in *Cacciato*, Mr Cowling embodies the good, wholesome American man – principled, law-abiding, patriotic, his legacy more subtle but just as heavy as the crippling denigration poured on their children by the negative paternal figures portrayed in *Northern Lights* and *In the Lake of the Woods*. Whether supportive or critical towards their sons, the fathers in O’Brien’s writing – who, as already intimated in Chapter 1, are never held directly responsible for their children’s participation in the war – provide in shorthand a key to the development of their sons’ lives. A sense of belonging, a connection to the national past, the obligations tied in with the entitlement to the American way of life, but also feelings of inadequacy, and the earliest and most hurtful betrayals constitute the cultural and emotional baggage that fathers pass on to their sons in O’Brien’s novels. America, it seems, is a father-country, for good and for bad. Significantly, the male lineage is short-circuited on the two occasions when the narrator-protagonists become fathers themselves, in *The Nuclear Age* and *The Things They Carried*: here, the two narrators are on the receiving end of an intense questioning from their little girls, who act as projections of the main characters’ frustrated desire for meaning and love, and signs of their post-traumatic inability to establish successful adult relationships.

Before moving on to the exploration of O’Brien’s topography of trauma, it is worth making a final observation about the mythical geography of the United States in *The Nuclear Age* (and in O’Brien’s work in general). In the

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24 ‘Custer’s refusal to retreat at the Little Bighorn suggests America’s refusal to cry “uncle” in Vietnam and the inability of the inhabitants of the nuclear age to say they have had enough’; Kaplan, *Understanding Tim O’Brien*, p. 150.
early pages of the novel, just after the description of Custer Days, William reports his father’s assessment of Fort Derry:

‘Culture’s that way,’ my dad would say, pointing east, ‘and if you want it, civilization’s somewhere over that last ridgeline, more or less,’ then he’d hook a thumb westward, as if hitchhiking. Isolated. Fifty-eight miles from Yellowstone, eighty miles from Helena, twenty miles from the nearest major highway. (NA, 11)

Thus, in no uncertain terms, O’Brien’s darkest novel makes a familiar point: as the characters find themselves stranded, or indeed brought up since birth, in a no-man’s-land, the relativity of the concepts of culture and civilization is once again brought to the foreground. This idea was already present in O’Brien’s first book; the precariousness of civilization is brilliantly and poignantly captured in If I Die in the description of the soldiers’ fear of getting lost while walking at night through Vietnam:

The man to the front and the man to the rear were the only holds on security and sanity. We followed the man in front like a blind man after his dog, like Dante following Vergil through the Inferno, and we prayed that the man had not lost his way, that he hadn’t lost contact with the man in front. [...] The man to the front is civilization. He is the United States of America and every friend you have ever known; he is Erik and blonde girls and a mother and father. He is your life, and he is your altar and God combined. And, for the man stumbling behind you, you alone are his torch. (IID, 83)

In Vietnam, civilization is nothing more than the man at the front, the symbol of all that is good and noble and familiar. And yet, as it transpires from O’Brien’s later works, the fragility of this link with our cultural and existential certainties accompanies us wherever we are. In O’Brien’s narrative universe, the American frontier is less the place to test and consolidate a strong sense of identity than a space of insecurity and self-questioning, where substances and appearances blend, while characters are left on their own to work out the moral implications of their interpretation of reality and of their actions. By the same token, whether at home, or in Vietnam, the threatening landscape of the ‘Indian Country’ is exposed as the projection of deep-rooted, subjective fears, a place haunted by imported ghosts. In the end, civilization, rationality and culture are always somewhere else, even in America.

25 Erik is the like-minded trainee whom the protagonist of If I Die makes friends with at Fort Lewis. The two are united by a common belief that the American intervention in Vietnam is without just reason. Unlike O’Brien, who gambles on the belief that he is too good to become a grunt, Erik chooses at the beginning of basic training to enlist for three years, thus securing his escape from infantry duty.